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The Sweetest Little Doggo

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Phirga walked the length of one of the corridors of her ship, absently fidgeting with her feather coat, straightening a feather there, folding them above and around each other to get the patterns she liked to show off. Her calm green eyes observed all around her, her beak a glistening black jet. She loosened her uniform, almost time to sleep and let her XO, Grekaq, take the helm for the next night-cycle.

She was captain of a trader travelling through the outer rims of the galaxy. Dangerous space, which wasn't very nice, but it did bring a decent profit. Of course, with the added risk, she had as a precaution enlisted several death-worlders, a group of humans, as protection. It was not ideal, but they had been the only outfit on the asteroid station, and she had dealt with death-worlders before, but not so much the humans.

While most of her crew was understandably skittish and nervous around them, and she was less than fond of their focused gaze herself, she had learned (prior to hire, of course) that for the most part, they were not likely to assault any on their own ships, as long as they "liked" their crewmates, and most luckily did. Best of all, they took payment, and took their jobs seriously. Even if there were some they did not get along with, they were more likely to simply avoid those, rather than attack.

As the humans on her ship had said, in space, everyone pulls their weight, or everyone dies. Out here at least, they did have their priorities in order. While the detriment of a nervous crew was something to consider, the pros of having the deterrent of death-worlders on board for any would-be pirates more than made up for it.

Phirga had had some unfortunate experiences with death-worlders before, but even amongst those other freaks, the humans were in a league of their own. She recalled their first meeting and subsequent recruitment.

This groups' leader, Gustave, had insisted on bringing his "dog", a so-called "canine" animal from their homeworld on board. Phirga had not initially been against it, as she had little to no experience with "dogs", other than hearing them mentioned from time to time in what had to be tall tales from other traders. She heard Gustave describe it in such words as "the sweetest little doggo", "best behaved doggo this side of the galaxy", "the biggest, dumbest, friendliest doggo you've ever seen". While she did assume it was somewhat exaggerated (and wondered why Gustave insisted on saying "doggo", the manner in which he gushed over it, and why its size description was *wildly* inconsistent), she had not been ambivalent about it, until she had seen the "the sweetest little doggo" for herself.

It was massive, with long, savage fur, and even when neutral and calm, that mouth was so spirits-damned terrifying. Then it had yawned, and she got a good look at, what had until that moment been hidden, the horrifying maw, so horrifying that it was vulgar. Beasts like this were the stuff of terror, and long ancient tales of monstrosities in the night. She had almost fainted.

Through some miracle she had remained conscious, while the dog strode casually up to the group of humans, snuggling, *snuggling* through the group, before arriving in front of her. She had been frozen in fear as the "dog" had sniffed at her, and then given her beak a lick. It effortlessly reached her head, barely having to jump from its front-legs. She had been too frozen to pull her head back, or she would have. But the human, Gustave, had been pleased, declaring that "Nano" liked her.

As far as she knew, "nano" was a terminology for something meant to be small. And as if to allay her fears, he informed her it was a well trained "Caucasian Shepherd Dog", as if that told her anything at all. Even so, as she did need their help, she had reluctantly agreed to allow them on board, on the condition that the dog with the misleading name be kept under very close watch. And here they were.

If the crew took their care around the humans, they snuck by Nano as if their lives depended on it. Which, if her assessment on its combat capabilities were correct, it probably did. She had read up on "dogs" while on their trip, and some articles were ...concerning.

They had been used as animals of war for a long part of their history, and their sense of smell was apparently legendary, even amongst the humans, and hiding from one was near impossible if it was trained. What was more concerning was that they were hunters, pack-hunters at that, and how they had once been a predator species of the humans, something called "wolves". That had lasted until the humans had turned around and completely domesticated them in a display of domination and intelligence so absolute it had created an entirely new species. To add to that, the "dogs" were exclusively meat-eaters.

But it wasn't all bad. She had also read from multiple sources that the humans were considered "family" by the dogs, and most humans reciprocated the dogs unconditional affection. Dogs apparently bonded relatively easily, and when they had properly bonded, just about always, remained unconditionally loyal and would protect their "families" until death. Although such determination was somewhat normal amongst death-worlders, it was a far cry from what could be expected from any beasts in symbiotic relationships with other species in the galaxy, even on other death-worlds. No other known species had done what the humans had done so completely, most death-worlders had simply eradicated what threatened.

But the dog, Nano, had not yet mauled anyone, so she considered that a resounding success. A very select few of her crew had even formed something of a rapport with the animal, and were less afraid by the day. Which, *really*, was not saying much.

And then, to break her monotonous stroll, Qircan, her chief guard came running up to her, as fast as his four legs could carry him, his body-plates shifting and crackling in agitation.

"It's Gustave and Nano!" he loudly declared, not caring who they were waking.

"What about them?" Phirga asked, dreading the answer.

"They're *fighting*! It appears Nano is on the verge of overpowering the human!"

All colour drained from her, and she unfurled her wings and followed, barely noticing that others had woken from the commotion, opening their own doors to see what was happening. Gustave had barely left his shift, and was supposed to be sleeping. For some unfathomable reason, he normally slept with the monstrous Nano next to him, and that animal could rival his size when on its hind-legs. She assumed the worst, that a power struggle between them had arisen, and that only one would be left alive, or at best, severely injured. That was also in the files she had read, dogs liked to have a leader to follow, and if none were present, they would fight for dominance in a group.

They reached Gustave's chambers before any spectators or security, and she immediately saw Nano, pouncing and snapping after Gustave's hands, which kept moving to either side of Nano's head, never reaching the base of the neck, where she had seen him grab the dog to dispense discipline previously, but he could not reach. Its paws were constantly beating away the humans hands, or the maw was in the way. Gustave was on the floor, leaning back, being pushed so hard in the chest Phirga doubted she would be able to breathe, had their places been switched. Nano focused on Gustaves' hands, snorting and sneezing constantly, its maw at full display, causing Qircan to retreat several paces. It was so fast, snapping at the hands as soon as they appeared, instantly shifting its attention when the other darted forward.

"Gustave!" she shouted.

"What, Captain?" Gustave replied distracted.

"What?! What do you mean, "*what*"?"

"Ouch!" Gustave declared, as Nano bit his hand.

By now, a large crowd had gathered, security, crew, and other humans. Security had weapons, which she was grateful for, but before they could prepare to shoot, the humans had realized, grabbed their weapons, and rapidly pointed them at the ceiling. They were looking *very* displeased, simultaneously reminding everyone exactly who they were, and what they were dealing with.

"You're not gonna hurt Nano!" one of them declared sternly.

"Oh, no, Qircan, call the medics!" Phirga ordered.

"Immediately!" he replied.

"What, medics? I don't need medics!" Gustave said as he suckled his hand.

"You've been fighting the dog, and it just bit you!"

"We're just playing!" Gustave said, as Nano looked very pleased with herself, even Phirga could tell that, Nano's tail wagging wildly, and resumed the snapping, the disturbingly long teeth on full display, its face furrowed in aggression she had only seen in horror flicks. "Be careful though, don't get closer. She's very excited right now, she'll snap at anyone."

"See, you're admitting it! She bit you!" Phirga continued.

"Oh, this? Nano didn't even break the skin. I'll probably have a small bruise, if that." Gustave replied, showing his hand, which indeed appeared unharmed, save for a small red mark. As he continued the so-called game, she did pick up that he had indeed matched the dogs speed during their "play", kept matching it, and she was more nervous than ever over the habits of these mad death-worlders. Gustave gradually calmed the dog down. Eventually, he managed to muzzle the dog with his hand, Nano breathing heavily, still wagging her tail.

"Alright, you win this time, you big goof. We'll continue later, we need to calm everyone down." Gustave said lovingly to the large predator, roughing up its fur.

He stood, as the dog stepped back, moving to its bowl and started drinking prodigiously, and messily.

"...You're telling me that was *actually* playing?" Phirga asked.

"I said it was, didn't I? You heard all those snorts and sneezes. That's her way of saying she's only playing, she's not out to hurt anyone. Dogs often do it during rougher, more wild play sessions to say; Hey, this is fun and all, but let's not let it escalate into a fight."

"That face was so full of fury, I do not even have words to describe it!"

"She was playing! Look, is that a dog who looks likely to maul anyone anytime soon?" Gustave said, gesturing towards Nano, who was now edging towards the crowd, tongue out, and the crowd promptly retreated.

"Wait, don't answer that." Gustave finished.

All had retreated except the humans, one of whom crouched and congratulated the dog on biting 'that cheap bastards hand' while scratching it behind the ear, which seemed to please Nano to no end, leaning heavily into it.

Just then, the alarm blared on the ship, and the lights shifted to red.

"Captain, we have a contact in system! It is the Corsairs of the Silver Serpent!" came over the speakers. "They are hailing us, demanding that we lower our shields!"

"Spirits damn it!" Phirga spat. The Corsairs were a notoriously bad group to meet, and unfortunately, they were well established and had significant forces at their disposal. She intently hoped the humans would turn the tide, but had never seen them fight. She suspected that this would quickly turn very, very bloody.

"They are threatening to board us, and unless we surrender, they offer no quarter!" her pilot shouted through the comms. "It is a raiding vessel, they don't have anything to speak of in ship-to-ship weapons our shields cannot handle, but they are faster, and their armour will allow them to ram us for entry."

Phirga turned, deciding to ignore the issue with Nano for now, and quickly raced to the bridge. She caught the sight of crewmembers praying to whatever god or gods they subscribed to, but in a mixture of relief and fear, the humans followed without hesitation, as did Nano.

Phirga flew the last dozen meters, her legs feeling too slow for her at the moment. As she came to a near halt immediately after entering the bridge and landed roughly, she saw the Corsair captain smirking behind his barked plume on a holo-screen, and a vile glint in the eyes.

He or she was a Scorcid, not a death-worlder, but an unusually aggressive species which had rejected relations with the rest of the galaxy, and remained isolationist even to this day, almost 240 cycles after their initial First Contact. They did not control much territory, and was in no position to make a threat as a whole, so most of the galaxy was content letting them be. Only individuals left their space. It was a plantoid species, with surprising speed for their biology, and had needles filled with toxin (capsaicin, a substance banned in over 50 systems) in flails emerging from their backs, their "heads" being bulbs of fruity flesh, covered on almost all sides by protective bark. Their four to five appendages looked like hooked and crude branches, with cruel hooks at the end. While looking slightly ridiculous, she had seen one let loose before, and it had not been a pretty sight, and one she had determined not to be on the receiving end of.

She could see other crews around it, some being fellow Scorcids, while others again were from different species she did not care to classify at the moment.

"Captain. Surrender. Now. Surrender, prisoners, slaves, taken. No surrender, corpses." it said. Scorcid translation tech was rudimentary at best, and they did not have much interest in talking anyway.

Before she could say anything to her own comms, Gustave, who had been somewhat out of frame spoke to Nano, who had been entirely out of frame.

"Nano." he said, pointing at the camera. Nano had instantly tuned all her attention to that little lens. "Rumble."

The transformation was shocking. If Phirga thought the dog was vicious before, this was nothing short of cosmic horror.

A deep, deep rumble came from the depth of Nano's throat, a sound like rocks breaking. Nano's face had contorted in wrinkles and anger at those who would *dare* to threaten them, its fur standing on end, making an even larger and more frightening frame. Phirga's attention was entirely on the transformed dog, or she would have seen the eyes of their would-be assailant flicker in doubt at the sound. But Gustave saw, and smirked.

"Nano, pounce." he said. And pounce Nano did.

In a furry flash lasting less than a second, Nano had shoved her face in front of the camera, her maw at full display, teeth, spittle and madness and fury like none she had seen, barking, screaming and biting at the lens. The readily apparent desire, the desperate *need*, to reach through that lens and maul whatever her master pointed her at to shreds and beyond was so palpable one pilot actually fainted in fright, and all others abandoned their posts and retreated to the furthest walls.

Phirga had only a second to see the Scoricid captain cower in fear and dread, eyes sunken and terrified, its glands wide open in its panic, oozing liquid. She also noticed the bridge had cleared in much the same manner her own had. Then comms cut.

It had taken them almost an hour to get the pilots calmed and back in their seats, and to confirm that the Corsairs were long gone.

"Spirits... Wha... *How* do you control that beast?! And what the hell are *you*, to have such control?" she eventually managed to squeak at Gustave. "Don't tell me that was just playing, Nano looked ready to kill."

"Oh, she was." Gustave replied calmly. "I told you, she is the best behaved doggo this side of the galaxy. I've had her since she was six weeks, and have trained her since then, she is five years now. Gotta treat them with respect and love though, I've seen them turn on mean owners, and that is not pretty."

"But, I mean... It could turn on you in the night, it could decide it does not like you telling it what to do! There is a thousand ways it could go wrong!"

"Sure, but it *likes* me. It likes the rest of my crew as well, and apparently likes yours as well." he answered with a shrug, one of those complicated moves their skeletons could make. "You must have seen her raise her head as they walked by, ignoring them, or letting them pet her. Well, not all I suppose, not too many have tried yet."

"And I suspect it won't be many more after that display." Phirga said.

"Hah! Can't argue that. But rest assured, captain. It is no more likely to attack than I am, unless you provoke it. We humans have been keeping dogs for thousands of years, and we know them pretty well by now." Gustave said. "Go on, give her a scratch behind the ear, I'd say she's earned it, chasing off the pirates all on her lonesome."

Phirga cautiously approached, intensely disliking Nano's attention right now. It rose, and wagged its tail calmly, slowly moving towards her, almost as uncertain as she was, as if it was unsure of why Phirga was so nervous. Nano stopped short, sniffing at her hand, then licked it, looking at her as if it was afraid she was hurt, and she finally looked into those big brown eyes. Phirga forced her hand to stop shaking, and moved slowly, deliberately to the back of Nano's ear, and started scratching.

Nano leaned heavily onto her, almost pushing her over, but even she knew this was not aggression, but it took some effort to keep balance. The rest of the crew looked at her as if she'd gone mad, but for the first time, she actually paid attention to its soft fur and the feel against her own feathers and skin. She had given it some pets before, but not like this. Nano kept leaning, and toppled over her, laying there on top of her. It did not hurt, but she could not for the life of her lift it off of her.

Qircan moved at the sudden development, but Nano had caught the movement, and gave a soft bark, which Qircan wisely took as a hint to back off.

"Nano, no." Gustave said a bit sternly, and Nano's ears drooped ever so slightly, but did not move, and Phirga realized it was Nano attempting to protect her, even if it was misguided.

Phirga kept scratching behind the ear, and Nano behaved as sweet as a newborn Kraiww, and felt as though she was melting into a warm fuzzy blanket until Gustave started to pull her off of her. Nano was not particularly cooperative, but accepted it, and Phirga could finally find her feet.

"Hm. I guess it could be worse. I have a tale to tell for drinks now, I suppose." she said, calming her heartbeat. "Not every day you get smothered by a death-world predator and live to tell the tale."

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It had been several months since the incident with the Corsairs. Phirga walked the length of one of the corridors of her ship, absently fidgeting with her feather coat, straightening a feather here, pulling a long hair out there. Her calm green eyes observed all around her, and saw the huge dog strolling in towards her, tail wagging.

She had decided to hire the humans on a more permanent basis, and they thanked her for the employ and steady pay and feed. She appreciated their work-ethic, and their strength came in handy more often than not. The tale of Nano's rabid display had spread like wildfire amongst the crew, and it had taken her weeks of persuasion and showing that one could indeed approach the beast without risking horrible, painful death before the rest of the crew had dared to approach it again.

There had been other assaults since, but most retreated rapidly after getting a proper close-up of Nano. One particularly brave (or particularly stupid) pirate crew had ignored the "warning", and boarded.

They had been met by a hail of fire, sharp metal and fangs and teeth. The humans were tested mercenaries after all, and had torn through them like a claw through fabric, but the real terror had come from Nano, the primal savagery spreading fear and panic like nothing else.

After some thinking and soul-searching, the crew had at last come to the conclusion that it was better to have the death-world humans and their dogs as friends and allies, and could grasp the concept that they would not attack their own pack, as she had to explain it. After a while, they had accepted it, and after a little while longer, Nano enjoyed more pets and scratches than ever, and had become more of a morale boost and even mascot for the crew, and Nano was all too happy to oblige.

As a bonus, the sheer amount of guts it took to befriend such a beast earned them more than one free drink on shore leave, not to mention openly talking banter to "their" death-worlders without fear of reprisal. The contrast in their actions towards friends and enemies were the most extreme she had ever seen.

She greeted the dog, and bent down, butting her head against it. "Come, Nano, let's go to the bridge!"

Nano gladly followed, passing Gustave for a scratch and a big lick on the face. She reached the bridge, her pilots at their places and her XO keeping everything running. She sat down in her captains chair, and looked over the tablet for any new assignments, while absently petting Nano.

Beside her, Nano sat, content as you like, enjoying Phirga scratching her ear, looking every bit the sweetest little doggo, the biggest, dumbest, friendliest doggo you'd ever seen.